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ABSTRACT

Students in two university classes (n=12, n=22) of Spanish as a second language were surveyed concerning the effectiveness of the communicative approach to second language learning, particularly in relation to class size. Written reports were elicited on this topic, and written reactions to nine in-class communicative activities were also collected. In the larger class, about two-thirds students considered their class as average in size, and a slightly smaller proportion also considered this size ideal for foreign language instruction. In the smaller class, 92 percent considered theirs a small class, while about half considered the ideal class size to be 15-20 students. The main reasons given for ideal class size preferences were individual attention given by the teacher and verbal interaction in small group work. The larger class was less convinced of the value of small group work. Both groups were divided concerning the effectiveness of in-class vs. out-of-class study strategies. These results are compared with the perceptions of teachers concerning ideal class size and instructional techniques for foreign language teaching and for English-as-a-Second-Language teaching, researched in two previous studies, and issues related to class size in second language teaching are discussed. Contains 35 references. (MSE)

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# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATIVE TEACHING AND CLASS SIZE

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Trainers of teachers of EFL have often presented oral communication activities as a way to increase fluency of students in a foreign language. However, experienced EFL teachers often point out that such communication activities are impractical in their large EFL classes. They tend to believe that they can not be expected to get the same results with a large class that they could get with a small class and that class size is a significant variable in development of fluency in the language.

Primary, secondary, and college non-native English-speaking teachers of English in Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa were questioned about their perceptions of difficulties in teaching in larger classes (Lancaster-Leeds Project). We duplicated this study with questionnaires given to American teachers trained to teach ESL in the USA and now teaching in the EFL context in Central Europe. The results of both studies showed similar concerns about teaching in large classes, especially as related to communicative teaching. Teachers tended to worry about not being able to give individual attention to students, especially in oral communication activities. Teachers were concerned about control and discipline in larger classes and not being aware of everything taking place, especially in oral communication activities. Teachers felt that they could not evaluate all assignments, both those written at home and those produced in oral communication activities. Teachers also felt uncomfortable about having to speak to large numbers of students.

It is interesting that the American teachers trained in ESL teaching in smaller classes had the same reactions to teaching in larger classes as their more experienced colleagues in the Lancaster-Leeds studies. However, the ESL trained teachers had additional concerns about large class teaching not expressed by their EFL colleagues. They pointed out that a lack of placement of students according to proficiency levels resulted in mixed-ability classes. This made it more difficult to teach, especially oral communicative activities in larger classes. Physical constraints, such as a fixed-row seating arrangement, made pair and group work for communicative teaching difficult to manage. Overcrowded noisy classrooms also made it difficult for the teacher to walk around the class.

The teachers in both studies seemed to worry that their students were not learning everything in larger classes. However, these worries show that even when teachers are working in conditions which they perceive to be extremely difficult situations, they still have the best interests of the students as their main concern.

The Lancaster-Leeds project on language learning in large classes published studies on their research on the relationship between student achievement and class size. Much of the evidence in these studies suggests that class size does not have a negative effect on students' achievement in the foreign language. In other words, there seems to be no relationship between class size and student achievement. However, these studies seem to indicate a relationship between class size and achievement in a class of about 15 to 20 students. When a class gets bigger than 15 to 20, it probably does not matter at all how big it is because achievement will be the same. For example, reducing a class from 50 to 30 will have practically no effect on how much the students learn. Only if a class is reduced from 50 to 15-20 students will there be any effect on achievement in foreign language learning. Therefore, we can assume from the results of the Lancaster-Leeds studies that it probably does not matter too much in achievement how large the classes are, once the class has more than 20 students.

Because of this lack of relationship between student achievement and class size found in the Lancaster Leeds studies, we did not want to compare test scores of students to determine which of two class sizes, larger or smaller, is better in student achievement. We wanted to record the perceptions of students about learning in large classes to compare with the perceptions of teachers. We wanted to see how students perceive the use of oral communication activities in classes of different sizes. From our study, it could be possible to answer the following questions:

Do students' beliefs and attitudes toward the communicative approach to foreign language learning vary according to class size?

Do students feel that oral communication activities are effective for language learning in both larger and smaller classes?

## METHOD

### Subjects

There were two classes: one of 12 students and one of 22 students. The subjects were American students studying Spanish as a foreign language on the university level in the USA. They were in their fourth semester of Spanish, which met the requirements for study of a foreign language. They had a one hour class which met three times a week for a total of 45 class hours for the length of the course. They were 17 to 20 years old with an average grade of B or above average grades in previous semesters of Spanish on the university level. The majority of students ranked in the top 10% academically in secondary school; all except one had had an average of two years of study of Spanish in secondary school.

The instructor in this pilot study was a TESOL graduate student and a native speaker of Spanish. He was an experienced teacher of English to large classes in his country, Colombia. Over 90% of instruction was given in Spanish in this advanced language course. The syllabus was based on two textbooks: a contrastive grammar-translation textbook and a culture-oriented textbook with extensive reading passages

### Data Collection Procedures

We elicited written reports from students on their perceptions and experiences in learning Spanish with the communicative approach to teaching in the foreign language learning context. We also collected students' written reactions to each of the nine in-class communicative activities used in the larger and in the smaller class. Because of the limitations of written reports, this descriptive study should be considered a pilot study to be duplicated in both larger and smaller classes in the foreign language learning/teaching context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The definition of a large class seems to be relative. While teachers in the U.S. may consider a foreign language class of more than 25 students as large, teachers in another country may consider a foreign language class of 100 students as small. Thus, the idea of a large class varies from country to country and even from one institution to another, e.g. secondary school or college. Therefore, it seems that teachers do not share a universal concept of the size of the ideal class. What is considered a large or a small class seems to reflect the particular teaching conditions.

In Table 1, 68% of students in the larger class consider their class of 22 as average in size and 64% as the ideal size for a foreign language class. This student perception is based on the experience of these students who have already had several classes which have been this large. Therefore, they have not had the experience of learning in a smaller class. However, their teachers point out that although this size of foreign language class is average, it is too large or not ideal for effective communicative teaching. This perception is based on the experience of these teachers who may never have taught in a smaller or larger class than 20-30 students. According to the Lancaster-Leeds project report, teachers consider ideal class size as 20-60 students in the EFL context in non-English speaking countries,

In the smaller class, 92% of students consider their class of 12 as small while 50% consider the ideal class to be 15-20 students. This perception of class size is again based on the experience of these students who have already had several foreign language classes of the average size of 20-30 students. Therefore, they perceive their class as small. However, based on the current experience in this class, they perceive the ideal class to be a little larger, 15-20 students.

In the ESL teaching context in the U.S., teachers would perceive this class of 12 as ideal or average for effective teaching and learning whereas in the foreign language teaching context, teachers would perceive this class as unusually small. This perception may be based

on their lack of experience in teaching such a small class. In the EFL teaching context in non-English speaking countries, teachers would consider a class of 12 students as too small for effective teaching and learning, as reported in the Lancaster-Leeds studies.

When students were asked to give reasons for preferences for ideal class size and perceptions of teaching techniques, they often gave more than one answer whereas other students gave no answer at all. Therefore, we took the total number of reasons to calculate the percentages and included in the tables those reasons with the higher percentages.

The main reasons given for preferences for ideal class were individual attention of teacher and verbal interaction in the foreign language in small group work. The reasons given for preferences for ideal class size in Table 2 complement the students' perceptions of teaching techniques for successful foreign language learning in Table 3.

Students again preferred opportunities for verbal interaction in the foreign language in small group activities and teacher use of the foreign language in class. These activities all develop listening/speaking skills which seem to reflect the interests and needs of the students.

An interesting difference between the two classes is the perception of students in the larger class regarding small group work (Table 2, 31% and Table 3, 25%) compared with perception of those in the smaller class (Table 2, 50% and Table 3, 56%). This difference can be interpreted by the instructor's self-evaluation. He pointed out that there was not enough time in the larger class for all the students to report on their work in the small groups to the class as a whole. However, these group reports are not absolutely necessary to develop fluency in the language in oral communicative activities.

For tables 4, 5, 6, some students often gave more than one strategy whereas other students gave no strategy at all.
We used the total number of strategies to calculate the percentages and included in these tables those strategies with the higher percentages.

Both groups of students seem to be equally divided between the use of strategies for study before or after class and the use of strategies in class. Students may believe that classroom lessons are not the only factor for successful foreign language learning. Perhaps students consider what they do outside class is as important for successful foreign language learning as what they do inside class. Significant progress in learning may be a result of individual efforts outside the classroom with what takes place in the classroom as the starting point. Students may develop alternative strategies outside of class to ensure that they learn something in class. Thus, it may not matter what size the class is.

The majority of students in both classes seem to believe that preparation for the class and study before or after class result in effective foreign language learning. The strategies of mixing with foreign language speakers and talking with the teacher seem to be individual in nature and may be characteristic of American students. The Lancaster-Leeds studies report that students in other countries seem to use cooperative strategies or work together in small groups to prepare for a class.

There again seems little difference between students in the two classes for preference for in-class strategies for effective foreign language learning. The strategies of participating orally in class and paying attention and listening to the teacher may be strategies to deal with a particular situation. For example, the style and demand of the instructor in this pilot study who used communicative techniques of teaching and the foreign language in the classroom would require the strategy of participating orally in class. These strategies may have also developed in relation to a specific goal or interest of students to be able to understand and speak the foreign language. However, such learning strategies can only be studied indirectly as students may not recognize that certain behaviors are worth reporting.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

We can conclude that students' beliefs and attitudes towards the communicative approach to foreign language teaching does not vary according to class size in this study. We can also conclude that students believe that oral communication activities are effective in both larger and smaller classes.

Teachers feel that it is sometimes difficult to get to know their students as individuals in large classes. In our study, when the teacher organized small group activities and pair-work in the class, he did not have to address the whole class. Therefore, he was able to observe and work with individual students or with groups of students. In that way, he got to know the students better and understood better the problems they were having with learning the language. Even though in the larger class, he was not able to work with all the groups at every class meeting, he organized his time so that he had contact with each student at least twice a week in the three one-hour classes. In that way, the opportunities were increased for the teacher and students to talk with each other as individuals.

It is sometimes difficult for an experienced teacher to give up control of the class. However, the teacher does not need to monitor everything which happens in a communicative activity for development of fluency to take place. For example, a student in the smaller class reported: "I think that I learned more from working in small groups because I didn't feel intimidated and I used Spanish more." Thus, the teacher needs only to monitor enough to check if all students are participating in the foreign language or to answer individual questions.

Students in this study considered the atmosphere of the class relaxed because they had more opportunities to speak the foreign language. In other words, the teacher had fewer opportunities to speak and must have also felt less stress. Even though the teacher in our study did not spend the entire class time teaching, the teacher had very positive student evaluations and comments on his teaching performance. Students reported that they enjoyed problem solving

in small group discussions because it gave them an opportunity to not only speak more Spanish but also learn more about classmates and their opinions. As one student in the smaller class reported: "Acting out scenarios is very good because we get to really speak Spanish in realistic situations and it's lots of fun."

The teacher does not need to evaluate everything that learners do and say in the foreign language. In our study, not everything that was produced in the communication activities was evaluated by the teacher. We felt that language can go uncorrected when the emphasis is on developing fluency. Asking students to work individually or with partners or in small groups gave the students responsibility for their own learning. Students then organized what they must individually learn and it was no longer entirely the teacher's responsibility what the students learned. Students evaluated each other's work. They corrected others' errors in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Students reported in both the smaller and larger classes that peer-correction and discussion and practice of grammatical points in small groups helped them to learn material.

If teachers feel that there is a greater difference in students' proficiency levels in larger classes, students can be placed in small groups according to proficiency levels. That way they can share textbooks when there are not enough for the class. Or students can do pair work where one member of the pair tutors the other. In that way, the more proficient student is reinforcing his knowledge of the language and practicing for fluency and the less proficient is getting individual help. In problem solving activities and roleplays, students voluntarily contribute according to proficiency levels. As one student in the larger class explained: "Role plays are fine as everybody has a chance to speak. Some who are better in the language take the parts of those who have a more important part in the play."

If the class is large, it is often noisy which makes it difficult for the teacher to address the class. When pair and group activities are taking place, the class is still noisy but it is no longer necessary for the teacher to make himself heard. If fixed-row seating makes it

difficult to manage group work, then students can be asked to change seats. In that way, they do not always work with the same students in the small groups activities.

This pilot study seems to indicate that perhaps what happens in larger classes is not in fact any different from what happens in smaller classes. The teacher in this study did not alter behavior or teaching method, no matter how many students there were in the class. Some activities may not be possible in all larger classes. However, it is better to explore possible solutions than exhaust oneself trying to do what is impossible or feeling stress because one can not do everything one would like. Teachers must try to organize activities so that responsibility is given to the students for what they learn. One way to do that is using techniques that promote interest for foreign language study and thus, learning achievement by students.

Table 1
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASS SIZE

| | Actual size | | Ideal size | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Larger class (N=22) | average | 68% | 20-25 | 64% |
| Smaller class (N=12) | small | 92% | 15-20 | 50% |

(Do you consider your current class as large or small? What is the appropriate number of students for a good foreign language learning atmosphere? Why?)

Table 2
STUDENTS' REASONS FOR PREFERENCES
FOR IDEAL CLASS SIZE

| ideal class size | larger class (20-25) | smaller class (15-20%) |
|---|---|---|
| individual attention of teacher | 33% | 33% |
| verbal interaction in foreign language in small group work | 31% | 50% |
| verbal participation in foreign language or English | 31% | 17% |
| verbal interaction with teacher in foreign language | 5% | 17% |

(Do you consider your current class as large or small? What is the appropriate number of students for a good foreign language learning atmosphere? Why?)

Table 3
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING TECHNIQUES
FOR SUCCESSFUL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

| Techniques | Larger class | Smaller class |
|---|---|---|
| Verbal interaction in foreign language in small group activities | 25 % | 56 % |
| Teacher use of foreign language in questions/minilectures | 31 % | 33 % |

(What has your teacher done that was helpful for your learning foreign language in the current class?)

TABLE 4
STUDENTS' STRATEGIES
FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

| Before/after-class strategies: | | In-class strategies: | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Larger class | 43 % | Larger class | 57 % |
| Smaller class | 50 % | Smaller class | 50 % |

(What useful technique/strategy for studying a foreign language would you advise to a beginning student?)

Table 5
STUDENTS' BEFORE/AFTER CLASS STRATEGIES
FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

| | Larger class | Smaller class |
|---|---|---|
| Prepare the lesson/study | 89% | 85% |
| Mix with foreign language speakers | 11% | |
| Talk with the teacher | | 15% |

(What useful technique/strategy for studying a foreign language would you advise to a beginning student?)

Table 6
STUDENTS' IN-CLASS STRATEGIES
FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

| | Larger class | Smaller class |
|---|---|---|
| Participate orally | 56% | 50% |
| Pay attention/listen | 19% | 25% |
| Attend class | 13% | 25% |
| Sit in front | 13% | |

(What useful technique/strategy for studying a foreign language would you advise to a beginning student?)

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